

hh- The Six Sensed Animal

By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

(A Summarised Transcription Of A Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk.)

SN.35.247: "...Suppose, bhikkhus, a man would catch six animals—with different domains and different feeding grounds—and tie them by a strong rope. He would catch a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a jackal, and a monkey, and tie each by a strong rope. Having done so, he would bind them to a strong post or pillar. Then those six animals with different domains and different feeding grounds would each pull in the direction of their feeding ground and domain. The snake would pull one way, thinking, 'Let me enter an anthill'... The monkey would pull another way, thinking, 'Let me enter a forest.'

"Now when these six animals become worn out and fatigued, they would stand close to that post or pillar, they would sit down there, they would lie down there. So too, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu has developed and cultivated mindfulness directed to the body, the eye does not pull in the direction of agreeable forms nor are disagreeable forms repulsive; the ear does not pull in the direction of agreeable sounds nor are disagreeable sounds repulsive; the nose does not pull in the direction of agreeable odours nor are disagreeable odours repulsive; the tongue does not pull in the direction of agreeable tastes nor are disagreeable tastes repulsive; the body does not pull in the direction of agreeable tactile objects nor are disagreeable tactile objects repulsive; the mind does not pull in the direction of agreeable mental phenomena nor are disagreeable mental phenomena repulsive." "It is in such a way that there is restraint..."

The Right Perspective Regarding The Body.

Can you have restraint of the six senses without the right context or perspective? No, because lack of perspective means that you are already pulled down with the senses, that's why the Buddha called sensuality (and the other hindrances) that which weakens wisdom, that which weakens perspective. When you get pulled down the pathway of the wild animal, you cannot sustain perspective. You either go down the hole or you sustain the perspective. I mention perspective is because usually when a person tries to do mindfulness of the body, they think it's about 'feeling the body', but actually 'mindfulness of the body' is the fundamental perspective regarding your world, the perspective on the presence of the 'body-there', as satipathana sutta says.

The 'body-there' is the basis for these six senses/animals. You can't have a sense organ without the unit of the body on which it is based on. That's why mindfulness of the body is the perspective regarding all the six animals/senses. It's not some physical method or practice of trying to 'stay in the body', it's rather on the level of knowledge of the body-there, knowing its nature, it's the 'post', from which these senses want to pull left and right.

If you contemplate the nature of that body, as something which is unownable, subject to death and so on, then no pleasures within the container of the body will be able to overwhelm that perspective if it's thoroughly developed. It's easy to say that this body is 'not-mine', but you need to see it on the right level. If you think that you are seeing the body on the right level of 'not-mine', then contemplate whether you have any passion or liability to passion (same with other defilements) in your mind. If the answer is yes then that's not the right level, because seeing the body on the right level is impenetrable to passion, aversion, and delusion. So if you, with a mind which is not above those things thinks that you are doing mindfulness of the body, you will not make the right effort to find out what the right level of mindfulness of the body is, the level which is not liable to the defilements.

When you hear about mindfulness of the body, you get an idea of it, but instead of focusing on 'doing' that mindfulness, focus on 'understanding' the idea of what mindfulness of the body is. Most people will take their initial idea for granted. They hear the teaching on mindfulness of the body and whatever comes to their mind that is what they do, convinced that they have understood mindfulness of the body right away. That would be very fortunate if that was true. Of course, you have to start having some idea but you must not take that initial notion for granted but instead keep clarifying that notion further: "Does my idea correspond to what the suttas describe? Does it make me completely dispassionate even when I am not practicing some kind of 'moment to moment focus on the body'? Is my mindful perspective an anchor which allows me to move around dispassionately and not liable to anger or distraction? Or is it something that when I focus on the body there are no defilements present but when I stop, the defilements slowly return? (If that is the case, that's not mindfulness, that's you just replacing one object with another)

Your idea must be upgraded, you must develop understanding, not just go with whatever you assume mindfulness of the body to be. If that mindfulness that you assumed was correct, you would have no more sensual pull. If you understand the mindfulness of the body, you will be enlightened. So don't conflate fulfillment of understanding of body-mindfulness with doing whatever you assume body-mindfulness is. So ask yourself: "What are the results of the body-mindfulness that you have been doing? What are the results even when you are not doing that mindfulness?". You might not have any passions while you are focusing on your particular practice, but what happens when you stop? Are you still liable to passion? Because if there was any understanding developed, it would remain even when you are not focussing on the body.

Identifying With The Senses.

Regarding sense restraint, the problem is not that the senses/animals want to go and feed in these different domains, the problem is that you don't know how not to identify with them. In other words, you don't know how not to take them as "mine". When the eye wants to see something, when the ear wants to hear something and so on, your first starting point is "I want to see something, I want to hear something..." and then you hammer down restraint on yourself and that's why restraint is unpleasant because there is a discrepancy there. That's why I say

that you shouldn't be trying to get rid of these things, you should restrain yourself but you should only do this on the basis of allowing these things to endure.

Your eyes want to see something, so you restrain your eyes from seeing but you don't ignore the fact that EYES want to see something that's unwholesome. That's how you get to outline the domain of the eye, you realise: "This is what an eye does". You don't want to be strangling the eye, but you will do so because you are identified with it and that kind of self-destruction is the only way out that you can see, but it's not the middle way.

The simile is of six animals, and you are the one that should be in charge of them, not being pulled around by them. The reason you are pulled is because you cannot stop identifying with them. When they pull, you feel like you are being pulled in that direction, and that's how you start. So you begin by not giving in to the pull, but if all you do is try to get rid of the pull, you are trying to remove the senses, trying to kill the animals, which still doesn't make you in charge, it just kills the animals.

You don't need all the animals to pull you, it's enough for just one to pull you and for as long as you are alive you will have at least one sense, at least your mind, even if all the other senses fail, you can still have the mind which pulls you. So the point is that you must not be pulled by those senses through your identification with them, not to not have the senses pulling. When I say "non-identification" it should not be understood as a matter of choice, as though you simply choose to non-identify. No, by not being able to endure the pull, by not having the clear context or perspective regarding the senses, you are automatically identified, so you can't just choose to say "this is not mine" but you can set yourself up so that you are unable to take it as "mine", and you set yourself up by sustaining the perspective regarding the various pulling senses. By contrasting the senses against the better, the more wholesome broader perspective that corresponds to the universal characteristics of the senses, and then you will get to see that the senses are truly wild animals. You can then see that you have a choice, to either let them run wild and then you will have to pay the price for that or indirectly know that if you allow your sense to go out, it could experience something which will result in its increased excitement and agitation, which then you will have to deal with, so it's better to restrain that sense so that you can abide in non-agitation, as opposed to having to spend a lot of effort having to calm the animal down and so on.

Mn.19: "...Just as in the last month of the rainy season, in the autumn, when the crops thicken, a cowherd would guard his cows by constantly tapping and poking them on this side and that with a stick to check and curb them. Why is that? Because he sees that he could be flogged, imprisoned, fined, or blamed if he let them stray into the crops. So too I saw in unwholesome states danger, degradation, and defilement, and in wholesome states the blessing of renunciation, the aspect of cleansing..."

All you need to do is prevent it from getting excited in the first place, and the more you do that, the more you maintain that perspective regardless of what sense is pulling you, the clearer the relationship with the senses becomes. In other words, less and less identified with them you will be. The senses will remain as they are, but the point of view will be different, in the same way,

that you see a dog, a bird, another person and now there is just this creature here (your body) which is always paired with you (closest to you) so to speak. This creature here (the body) is just the one that is closest to your point of view but still equally not yours. We usually regard this creature as our own, as our closest friend, but you should regard it as a stranger that doesn't necessarily mean you well. The creature is there, you are paired with the senses and you have no choice about that, but you have a choice whether they get agitated or not, or whether you will have to be dealing with that or not. That's why there is the instruction to "guard the sense doors" and not to chase down the sense objects so that you can try to get rid of them or destroy or shut down the senses. You guard the sense doors so that you will be able to see what is approaching before it arrives so that you won't have to deal with the agitations resulting from unwholesome engagements.

Sometimes you will fail at preventing the animals from getting excited on account of your carelessness, but still, it's better to not give in to them but instead restrains them forcefully, as the Buddha would say "crush mind with mind":

Mn.20: "...If, while he is giving attention to stilling the thought-sankhara of those thoughts, there still arise in him evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then, with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he should beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind. When, with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he beats down, constrains, and crushes mind with mind, then any evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion are abandoned in him and subside. With the abandoning of them, his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated. Just as a strong man might seize a weaker man by the head or shoulders and beat him down, constrain him, and crush him, so too...when, with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, a bhikkhu beats down, constrains, and **crushes mind with mind**...his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, **brought to singleness**, and composed..."

The more you practice that restraint, the clearer the danger of allowing the animals to run wild becomes. If all you are used to is being dragged around by the leashes of various animals, you never see the danger because you are constantly moving. By choosing the singleness of saying "No" as opposed to the diversity of spreading in every direction, the mind will become composed.

Usually, people think that singleness of mind will come at the end of their proliferation into the diversity of sense experience, where all proliferation ceases. No, singleness is when you undo all the proliferation and find a point BEFORE things proliferate and then you choose to stay on that level and protect it, you guard the doorway, that one entrance, that's one-pointedness.

If the senses are used to running wild, they will be pulling a lot in the beginning, that's what an untrained animal does but if you can maintain the right perspective regarding this creature, you will tame its senses and abide in jhana.